

Coalition-ANA Partnering: Lessons learned from a field-expedient artillery school

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Units deploying to Afghanistan and Iraq often partner with host nation security forces. In Afghanistan, 4th Battalion, 25th Field Artillery — part of an infantry brigade combat team — recently partnered with and trained artillerymen from the Afghan National Army. The commander's intent was to develop a partnership between his battalion, the Afghan National Army field artillery unit and a French operational mentor liaison team. Howitzer sections, fire direction centers, forward observers and the leadership teams could train, certify and qualify the howitzer crews on both the M119A2 105-mm howitzer — common to U.S. field artillery units in support of light infantry — and the Soviet era D30 122-mm howitzers used by the Afghan National Army. It was critical that the leadership teams of all three partners — including officers and master gunners — work toward developing the Afghan National Army field artillery's skills to provide indirect fires in combat.

The 4-25 FA's preliminary evaluation of the Afghan National Army unit before deployment, later confirmed in theater, suggested a formal training program was required to develop joint operational capabilities. The command sergeants major and master gunners determined the best way to develop these skills would be through creating a field artillery school.

Coordinating with the senior battalion NCOs and the French operational mentor liaison teams, the NCOs developed clever strategies to deal with manpower shortages, language barriers and the challenges of training the Afghan soldiers on Soviet-era equipment and fire support techniques.

The foreign internal defense mission also was well within the battalion NCO's competencies. The NCOs organized a field artillery school to train Afghan officers as forward observers in one instruction block, as fire direction officers in another, and to train gun crews from the ranks of the Afghan enlisted and NCOs. Each skill set was organized as a separate school, headed by NCOs — with the battalion command sergeant major as the NCO in charge of the school.

This article offers an examination of the phases of the partnering operation and a case study on the forward observer course taught by the battalion. It details how the subject matter was developed and tailored to the Afghan National Army, how the battalion prepared for the mission and lessons learned from the first graduating class. Similar lessons hold for the courses on fire direction and gun crews.

Planning the partnership. The battalion developed a multiphase process to work toward the goal of combined arms operations with the Afghan National Army. These phases were train the trainer and planning in the continental U.S. and in theater, the introduction and partnership in theater, equipment and familiarization

in theater, supply and maintainer in theater, field artillery Tables I to VI in theater, section certification and qualification Tables VII and VIII in theater, live-fire exercise in theater, graduation in theater, and combined arms operations in combat in theater.

Phase 1: Train the trainer and planning in the continental U.S. and theater. Phase I occurs throughout the deployment. During this phase, trainers were validated and the curriculum was checked throughout the training process. This phase also included cultural awareness training and the development of contacts list with the Afghan National Army and operational mentor liaison team and a roster of the partnered Afghan unit. Before the command sergeant major and master gunners validated the field artillery school trainers, each trainer rehearsed training blocks, rehearsed instruction with interpreters and trained selected interpreters on these fire support tasks.

M119s and D30 howitzers were collocated on the battalion's forward operating base to increase training efficiency. By having these howitzers collocated, gun crews assigned to the hot guns could help train the Afghan gun crews.

Finally, a records system was developed to track the training of the Afghan soldiers and crews. This is important as it provided an additional opportunity to train the Afghan unit chain of command on the importance of maintaining training records and using them to assess unit status and proficiency. From our vantage, this records system made it easy to assess the Afghan

National Army and report the students' status to the various agencies and commands responsible for tracking the Afghan national security forces' capabilities.

Phase 2: Introduction and partnership in theater. During this phase, assigned batteries and platoons met with their partnered Afghan units for team-building exercises, such as volleyball games, which are very popular in Afghanistan. It is highly recommended that U.S. units partnering with Afghan National Army or Afghan National Police units bring volleyball equipment for team building. Other team-building, mission focused activities include joint foot patrols in villages or urban areas.

Introductions to training partners and the exchange of job descriptions are important, as well as the development of working relationships between leaders. It may be necessary to educate the partnered Afghan unit and foreign operational mentor liaison team units on the U.S. Army officer-NCO partnership. This can be incorporated into blocks of instruction on troop-leading procedures and the development of the training plan between key leaders in all partnered units. The end state of this phase was the emerging relationships with Afghan peers that will continue to be built during the deployment and the deliverables include the training plan and agreement on tangible training goals.

Phase 3: Equipment and familiarization in theater. This phase includes a layout of all howitzers, fire direction and forward observer equipment of both the Afghan and U.S. crews. The layout, in every configuration, included all basic issue items and included a walkthrough and orientation on the equipment, its use, troubleshooting and demonstrations of crew drills.

The fire direction center conducted all operations using manual gunnery with charts, graphical firing tables and graphical site tables specific to the M119 and tabular firing tables. This exercise was particularly important because it allowed the Afghan soldiers to inspect the equipment and watch their U.S. partners in action and to visualize the goals they would work toward in the coming week. The end state of this phase was that U.S. personnel were familiar with

Afghan-issued Russian equipment, and Afghan personnel were familiar with U.S. equipment and crew drills.

Phase 4: Supply and maintenance in theater. During this phase the U.S. and Afghan personnel each learn to perform preventive maintenance checks and services on their own and their partner's equipment and demonstrate a working knowledge of using maintenance records. This phase continues throughout the relationship with the Afghan National Army. Helping the Afghans develop an inventory and hand receipt system can be challenging because of the low literacy rates amongst their soldiers. With the continued logistical challenges facing the Afghan National Army, supply problems and accountability are an important focus of the mentoring and training relationship. The evolution of the Afghans' battlefield operating systems continues to be the biggest challenge faced by its partner coalition units.

Another challenge was teaching the Afghans to conduct basic level maintenance tasks on daily, weekly and monthly schedules and teaching them the duties traditionally assigned to the Military Occupational Specialty 45B Artillery Mechanic. This is, again, an opportunity to teach the Afghans about the NCO Corps and its role in ensuring maintenance. The 4-25 FA taught Afghan National Army section chiefs to oversee preventive maintenance checks and services and record keeping, such as the use of Department of the Army Form 4513 Record of Missions Fired as a means of tracking howitzer use. Platoon leadership was taught to maintain records with the DA Form 2408-4 Weapon Record Data. Again, these training efforts were complicated by the literacy levels and the ability to get these forms translated into either Dari or Pashto.

Phase 5: Field Artillery Tables I to VI in theater. This phase requires Afghan soldiers to be trained and tested on Tables I through IV and development of a similar table system for the D30 crews, their fire direction centers and forward observers. The former is to be developed

during U.S. familiarization with the D30 weapons system and is the responsibility of the battalion master gunner. This phase begins with U.S., Afghan National Army forces and French operational mentor liaison teams training together on U.S. firing tables. Although the tables often needed to be adapted with respect to the mission constraints, the training included the Artillery Skills Proficiency Test, including the gunner's test and the awarding of qualification badges; Table I: Individual and Leader Tasks; Table II: Air Assault Rigging (M119 and D30); Table III: Machine Gun Training/Qualification; Table IV: Direct Fire Procedures; Table V: Occupations (Day and Night); and Table VI: Air Assault Raids and Operations.

The focus on air assault rigging, raids and operations is important, as the Afghan National Army Air Corp fields rotary wing aircraft and prepares to initiate air mobile operations during the battalion's current tour. The lack of Afghan fixed- and rotary-wing close air support suggests that the Afghans will be heavily reliant on their indirect fires, and the training emphasis reflected that priority.

Phase 6: Section Certification and Qualification Tables VII and VIII in theater. In this phase, Afghan soldiers train for and conduct a section certification (a culmination of all tables) to the battalion standard on both the D30 and M119 howitzers. The certification is evaluated jointly by U.S. and Afghan master gunners. Likewise, the U.S. Soldiers complete section certification on the D30s in accordance with the D30 section certification standards and are evaluated jointly by U.S. and Afghan master gunners.

After dry-fire certifications, both the Afghan and U.S. crews conduct Live-Fire Table VIII qualification with fire direction center and forward observers working together to complete Table VII. This phase certifies Afghan soldiers on both the D30 and M119 howitzers, certifies U.S. crews on the D30, and certifies the Afghan fire direction center and forward observers on Table VII.

Afghan National Army soldiers learning about howitzer systems in phase two of training. (Photo by MAJ Kevin K. Parker, U.S. Army)

Phase 7: Live fire exercises in theater. This phase is a series of one day events culminating in a live-fire exercise during which the Afghans fire all applicable missions. This phase is unique because the Afghan National Army must develop their own fire plans, complete four hours of live firing with the fire direction centers and forward observers observing and adjusting fires. This is challenging because the Afghan field artillery primarily is trained to engage known targets, thus the communication between the forward observer and fire direction center during adjust fire missions represents a formidable test of the training effectiveness. The missions were designed to be realistic to the training area and include walking shoots. It requires the Afghans to do battle tracking and to do so with methods that have been evolved by the U.S. and operational mentor liaison team cadre.

Phase 8: Graduation in theater. The forward observer pipeline cycles several times compared to a single cycle of the gunners and fire direction center classes. The latter are designed to take the entire year to reach Phase 9, in part because of the reduced training time of the Afghan gun crews. Graduation is designed to be a festive affair with advertisements, including invitations to the media, U.S. and Afghan higher headquarters, local officials and all soldiers on the forward operating base. Digitally crafted certificates and coins are awarded to the graduates and trainers, and support personnel are recognized with awards. Our ceremony was conducted on the gun line to facilitate photograph opportunities, and the ceremony concluded with a dinner party with U.S. and Afghan cuisine.

The 4-25 FA developed special awards to recognize the Afghan soldiers' achievements. Awards included a special partnership patch based on the partnership emblem. A U.S./ Afghan flag pin and U.S. gunner's badges were developed to reward Afghan soldiers with uncommon proficiency. Afghans generally enjoy receiving certificates with emblems and stamps on them. These rewards were the source of pride among the rewarded soldiers, inspiring competition among the Afghan soldiers to be recognized for their skills.

After-action reviews were conducted and documented, and certification rosters were prepared for future replacement in position and transfer of authority. Records

were compiled for the battalion historian. The end state was achieved, the training goals were met and public recognition of the Afghan accomplishments was well supported by attendance at the graduation and supporting information operations.

Phase 9: Combined arms operations in combat in theater. Ongoing joint operations following Phase 8 constitute Phase 9 to validate the partnership program further and enhance Afghans' combat capabilities. The desired end state for the partnership during 4-25 FA's deployment was a D30 Air Assault Operation with the Afghan National Army slingloading their howitzers to a forward area in support of combat operations. The visibility to the highest echelons of the Afghan National Army is important to this operation to inspire confidence in their organic capabilities and to demonstrate the effectiveness of the partnership.

These phases were not without their challenges. The D30 howitzers the Afghans have often are old with cracks, pits and an assumed operating risk. The ammunition is old. The propellant is old and smells odd; the physical integrity of its packaging is subject to mechanical failure. There are limited basic issue items for the howitzers and no trained maintainers or platoon sergeant. Equipment such as maps, calculators, protractors and tabular firing tables are also in short supply. The Afghan National Army is not trained to account for nonstandard conditions, assuming standard information without the help of metrological data, muzzle velocity variation or other data sets. Additionally, their fire direction center has only one person, so there are no redundant calculations of firing data for safety checks. These are just a few of the difficulties that have to be overcome during the partnering relationship—often requiring commanders to pick and choose what battles to fight to improve the Afghans' capabilities.

Forward observer training class. One excellent example of the three different schools is the forward observer training. The partnered Afghan unit was roughly competent with firing preplanned targets only with a level of subject matter expertise comparable to that required to complete Table I fires. With this assessment driving the curricula, the primary challenges to establish the schools were the availability of training materials in the Pashto and Dari languages and the use of Soviet-era artillery weapon systems.

Training materials, namely manuals and PowerPoint slides in Pashto and Dari, were found after a two-week search through historical data held by the combined joint task force fire support coordinator at Bagram Airbase. Many of these materials were developed and archived during a previous tour by the 82nd Airborne Division. This was the case for the forward observer course taught by a Military Occupational Specialty 13F Fire Support Specialist sergeant first class with help from two French operational mentor liaison team members assigned to the partnered Afghan unit. The rapid stand-up of the course (within 60 days of occupying the battlespace) was facilitated by the NCO's "train-the-trainer" approach to preparing the interpreter for the course. In this case, the NCO-in-charge took care in selecting a trilingual interpreter (Dari, Pashto and English) and in training him with materials and discussions a week before each topic. This made for efficient, effective classroom sessions and live fires.

Use of Soviet-era compasses and map reading conventions (NATO reads grids right and up; Russians read them up and right.) also represent hurdles to effective training of the Afghans, but having an experienced NCO-in-charge to review the materials and to gain proficiency on these standard operating procedures helped. Challenges included the availability of Russian 6000-mil compasses. The students—all of them company grade officers with a captain as the senior officer in the class—came from an Afghan battalion that had only one compass and one set of binoculars for the entire company. Additional materials, such as Russian protractors for map reading and tabular firing tables for the Russian D30 122-mm howitzer, also were required. We obtained them from the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan.

Training was broken down into three phases according to the 13F forward observer tasks, the 13F 100-series map reading tasks, the 13F 200-series forward observer tasks and the 13F 300-series tasks covering fire planning. Training included classroom instruction, practical exercises, simulator training with the Forward Observer Simulator from the Fires Knowledge Network for the adjustment of fires and live fire training. The U.S. NCO-in-charge, French operational mentor liaison team and a Category I local national interpreter directed and participated in all training events. All of these events were covered in a four to five week period and was facilitated by the prior knowledge and training of the Afghan officers. Forward observers in the Afghan National Army are

drawn exclusively from the officer corps.

Unique challenges to working with the Afghans had to be addressed for the successful completion of the training. Because many of the officers came from units that were not collocated with the field artillery battalion, logistical concerns such as transportation, billeting and rations were the responsibility of the school cadre.

This differed from the gun crew and fire direction center training classes, which were composed of Afghan officers and soldiers whose unit was collocated with the battalion, requiring that their training be limited to three days a week so they could participate in missions and complete duties with their own unit. For the transient forward observer students, an Afghan National Army requirement for religious study was worked into the training schedule as two half days off per week—in addition to being off every Friday to celebrate the Muslim holy day.

Tribal demographics within the Afghan National Army were another concern. Tribal heterogeneity within the class led to the formation of social cliques that potentiated tension among the Afghan officers. Team-building exercises and assigned group study can be used to bridge the divide between different tribes. In this case, class members were dependent upon each other for group study.

Also, the class leader—who was selected based on ability rather than assignment—was a member of a minority tribe and spoke Pashto, Dari and English. He became the *de facto* spokesman for the students, facilitating communication among the Afghan officers.

Before moving to the forward operating base for the training, we learned from some students that other officers in the unit may have been excluded from consideration for attendance because of their tribal origin. Thus, it may benefit coalition units to send a delegation to the partnered Afghan unit to get a class roster, determine the tribal origin of the soldiers and ensure that training is offered uniformly.

This is important because many Afghans still harbor bitterness over previous factional conflicts. It has been expressed among the Afghan trainees in the form of bragging about one faction beating another or the number of deaths inflicted by one group on another. Instructors should be particularly sensitive to this kind of banter, work with the interpreter to suppress this behavior as soon as possible.

Cadre for the forward observer training generally was pleased with the professionalism and effort the Afghan

officers put into the class. The small student-teacher ratio (nine to four, including the two French operational mentor liaison teams, the interpreter and the U.S. NCO-in-charge) contributed to the success by mitigating the tribal differences, facilitating camaraderie among the students, smoothing group training exercises and enabling more direct interaction between the cadre with the students.

During final live-fire exercises, Afghan officers conducted a variety of adjust and planned fire missions with U.S. gun crews manning M777 155-mm and M109 105-mm howitzers and Afghans manning the D30s. During this exercise, the students prepared terrain sketches, plotted known targets, spotted and adjusted fires with the U.S. gun crew via the class NCO-in-charge and interpreter. After the graduation ceremony, the class leader was allowed to stay on as cadre for the next class. This process of choosing the best student in the class as cadre ensures that a practiced, proficient pool of instructors will be created with the unit, and their technical competency and leadership is recognized by their fellow soldiers.

While appearing to be a new responsibility of the conventional U.S. Army, foreign internal defense is a mission that is particularly well suited to its NCO Corps. When the partnering relationship was identified in the battalion commander's intent as a priority, it ensured that the school—the brainchild of the senior NCOs in the battalion—would be resourced and supported properly by the staff and commander.

Years of experience as drill sergeants, schoolhouse instructors, deployments and training of U.S. units on newly fielded weapon systems and standing operating experience meant that each NCO was well prepared to conduct this mission. The resourcefulness of the NCOs in locating and preparing training materials also facilitated success on a short time scale.

These materials are now on the Fires Knowledge Network for all artillery units to access. The 4-25 FA NCOs acknowledge the stress incurred during the school's genesis in the early days of the deployment. Future units can prepare to succeed by using 4-25 FA's lessons learned, materials and curriculum to prepare at home station before deployment. To facilitate this effort, it is important that the instructional materials and relationships receive command recognition, priority and accommodation. The outgoing unit must educate the incoming unit leaders about the mission and help its Soldiers prepare. ■

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Command Sergeant Major Robert R. Lehtonen, field artillery, is the battalion command sergeant major for 4th Battalion, 25th Field Artillery Battalion, deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. His previous duty assignments include every cannoneer duty position for both light towed artillery and heavy mechanized artillery. He has served as an NCO Education System instructor, drill sergeant, gunnery sergeant, platoon sergeant, chief of the firing Battery, first sergeant, brigade S2 NCO-in-charge, battalion operations sergeant major, and brigade operations sergeant major.

BACKGROUND: The field artillery partnership emblem was designed for letterheads, award certificates and graduation certificates as a result of the Afghan National Army training program. (Courtesy of MAJ Kevin K. Parker, U.S. Army)